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ABSTRACT

Four keynote ideas can help partnerships form between communities and their schools. The first keynote is a new "social contract" for education in each community, based on agreement on values, school objectives, and group roles. The second keynote is the "public good." There exists a breakdown of community, a loss of the sense of the public good; it can be rebuilt, however, through youth programs, parent and citizen councils, and citywide organizations and public interest groups. The third keynote involves the reawakening of the idea of "mutual aid" instead of selfishness. Educators should see parents and community members as resources and should design educational programs in which learners take more responsibility for their own and others' learning. "The Home-School Connection," from the Institute for Responsive Education (IRE), reports on such mutual aid. Mutual aid can also include resource and service exchange with community agencies. The final keynote, "shared power," involves increasing parents' and citizens' roles in educational policy development and decision-making. Recent IRE findings on districts with declining resources indicate the community needs to be integrated into the formal procedures of district governance, not just manipulated. Four criteria help identify such integration. (RW)

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FOUR KEYNOTES FOR CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN THE SCHOOLS

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FOUR KEYNOTES FOR CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN THE SCHOOLS

By Don Davies
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There is a mean and sour mood in the country. Educators and citizen activists working for equity and quality in education are discouraged, frustrated, despairing. Some are giving up, burning out or dropping out... as public leadership appears to turn away from basic commitment to education and to the public school as a key policy instrument for this commitment. I am discouraged (as I'm sure many of you are) and upset by the Reagan administration's efforts to scuttle the education programs developed over the past fifteen years, to abandon requirements for parent involvement, and to turn away from Federal enforcement of civil rights, affirmative action, women's rights and other efforts to make the educational system fair and equitable.

I want to remind all those who are despairing that long term tendencies and social movements are far more important than immediate events. In this country and in Canada the long term trend is for an increasingly powerful public commitment to education as a necessary means for both individual development and life success and for the development of the economic, political and social strength of the nation. And, furthermore, there is a 150 year long trend -- throughout the Western world -- toward greater realization of fairness and equity across lines of race, sex, ethnic group and social class. These basic social movements -- despite current setbacks -- provide a realistic basis for optimism by citizen activists seeking to enlist the support and services and participation of the citizenry.

What we need now -- and what this conference can help to create -- is a working coalition between Citizen Activists and Educator Activists

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committed to equity and quality in education and to forming a new partnership between communities and THEIR SCHOOLS.

The beginning of such a partnership has to be agreement on general principles and goals. What do we want from the schools and from other educational institutions and agencies in the community? By whom should what decisions about education be made? We need to stimulate debate at the community level about what the schools should accomplish and what ground rules are to govern decisionmaking about the schools. Jerome Bruner made this point earlier this year after being away from the U.S. and our educational problems for seven years.

> "IF YOU DON'T MAKE EDUCATION AND ITS LARGER AIMS PART OF THE PUBLIC DEBATE, SO THAT THERE IS SOME BASIS FOR THE SHARING OF IDEAS, 'EDUCATIONAL TERRORISM BEGINS TO TAKE OVER. GROUPS LIKE THE OLD JOHN BIRCHERS AND THE NEW MORAL MAJORITY COME IN TO WRECK PROGRAMS THEY DON'T LIKE. THIS KIND OF INTIMIDATION IS MADE POSSIBLE BY MAJORITY UNCERTAINTY.'" (Psychology Today, March 1982).

What is needed to avoid educational terrorism is a new social contract for education in each community that clarifies shared values, agrees upon what the schools should try to accomplish, and sets the ground rules for the roles that all the key actors -- students, teachers, parents, administrators, school boards, community officials, taxpayers -- should play in the community's educational system.

I'm billed as being the keynote speaker. Therefore, I want to suggest four keynotes to you. The first is the point I have just made: the need for a new social contract in local communities. The other three can be summarized by these simple phrases:

"The Public Good"

"Mutual Aid"

"Sharing Power"

I want to say just a little about each of these keynote ideas...enough for you to determine whether the "keynote idea" is worth your exploring, clarifying, or applying.

First, THE PUBLIC GOOD. One doesn't have to be a sociologist or an Alvin Toffler to know that there has been a breakdown of community. Do not confuse "community" with nostalgia for the way that small towns and urban neighborhoods were supposed to be in some mythical golden age. I'm not addressing mobility, changing values, and family structure. What I do mean is akin to what the late Archibald MacLeish called a loss of the sense of the public or the public good. The society's sense of the public good was based on appreciating differences but recognizing that on some matters differences must be put aside and private interests sacrificed -- that on some matters ideological purity creates only immobilized policy -- and that negotiation and bargaining among conflicting interests is necessary to reach decisions that serve -- by the standards of reasonable men and women -- the public interest. The loss of the sense of the public good can be traced to an elevation of selfishness as a social norm...an overemphasis on individualism at the expense of collective or common interests and a loss of confidence in the agencies created to represent common public interests -- governments and institutions like the public schools. In the early 1970's we were talking about the greening of America. Now we must be talking about the "greeding" of America.

The greeding of America is fueled by a political system -- local, state and Federal -- that has become captive to the bankrolls and electoral muscle of myriad special interest groups, left, right and center: anti-abortion, save the whales, "save Oak Street School but close Elm Street School," put

prayer in the schools, take French fries and Pepsi out.

Citizen activists and educator activists -- sharing a social contract which makes clear what is most important in the schools and how decisions are to be made -- need to discover ways to reawaken the sense of the public good, and then to establish policies to help to support that ideal.

What can be done? A few examples. Youth participation programs can be initiated to give young people a real taste of responsibility and the satisfaction that can come from serving the interests of others as well as one's own -- programs such as Youth Tutoring Youth, adolescents serving as aides in day care programs, adolescents organizing and carrying out projects of oral history, historic preservation, or crime control.

Another prescription relevant to the need to recreate a sense of the public good is to support parent and citizen councils for planning, advising, problem solving, and decisionmaking that are comprehensive (rather than focused on only one topic) and which cut across race and class lines. Salt Lake City's comprehensive school policy councils are examples of such mechanisms. Finally, citizens and educators can create or strengthen existing town or citywide organizations that cut across neighborhood and class lines and provide a citywide mechanism for studying and solving problems and mediating among conflicting interests. Examples are public interest groups such as Leagues of Women Voters, and the Public Education Association of New York City.

I see building a sense of the public good not as a project or a program to be assigned to task forces but rather as a theme to provide coherence and direction as citizen activists and educator activists join forces to work for educational equity and quality.

I come now to my third KEYNOTE ... MUTUAL AID. An antidote to the installation of selfishness as public policy and national dogma is to

reawaken at the level of the classroom, the neighborhood, and the city or town, the idea of mutual aid. This idea rests both on the principle of caring and compassion and on the principle of self-interest that sees the exchange of benefits as the heart of good working partnerships between people and between groups.

Parents and other community interests must be seen by educators not as forces to be reckoned with but as vital resources. Children must be seen as beings whose individual growth and achievement can be advanced by helping and being helped by other children (as well as adults).

Mutual aid, which is always desirable from the perspective of my values, is of special importance in a time of fiscal austerity and in a time when educational institutions are no longer growing. In these times it makes sense to capitalize on all available learning resources. The place to start is in designing educational programs in which the learner assumes increased responsibility for his own learning and the learning of others -- again, youth tutoring youth programs are good examples, as are projects in which students are engaged in diagnosing and solving problems of violence and vandalism in classrooms and schools. School volunteer programs are another positive and significant example of mutual aid -- of a use of community resources to directly aid the educational program and at the same time benefit both the volunteer and the community. Many efforts are being made across the country to involve families systematically in the education of their own children in a way that reinforces and supplements the instructional efforts of the school. Parents become, in a planned and systematic way, co-producers of education, rather than passive recipients of it.

Let me pause here for a brief commercial...

Many of these efforts are catalogued, described, and analyzed in a new

report prepared by the National Institute of Education's Families as Educators Team and published this month by the Institute for Responsive Education. The report is entitled The Home-School Connection. These examples of the mutual aid theme are selected from 24 of the largest cities and include such projects as Jacksonville, Florida's Accountability in Citizenship Training Project which aims to reduce disruptive behavior among students at home or school by teaching parents, teachers and students positive behavioral change strategies. Teachers, parents and students work together in what is given a wonderfully old-fashioned title, "A Caring Team," to assist students in accepting responsibility for their own behavior. Indianapolis' Parents In Touch program includes a day of parent-teacher conferences in the fall, in which children's progress is specifically outlined and reading materials for work at home given to the parents, a dial-a-teacher service for questions about homework from students or parents, and a media campaign to build awareness of the role of the parent in the education of the child. In other cities programs provide workshops and training for parents, computer print-outs for parents which identify basic skill areas in which the child needs work, home instruction materials for parents, home visitors to work with families on developing skills to work on both instructional and behavioral problems, and cooperative home-school projects to monitor and increase school attendance.

The report summarizes the studies and evaluations which have been completed on such efforts which make it clear that the results and benefits of such efforts at mutual aid are substantial. To wit, attendance is improved, achievement in basic skills is increased, attitudes of children and parents toward teachers and school become more positive.

Still another kind of MUTUAL AID that is important to consider in fiscally tough times is exchange of resources and services among community

agencies and institutions. The principle on which these efforts rest is that the public school is simply one part of a community learning system -- that tasks of teaching and serving children should be distributed among schools, libraries, churches, civic organizations, health and welfare agencies, neighborhood houses and neighborhood associations, youth organizations, social service agencies, colleges and universities, pre-schools and day care centers and senior citizen organizations and agencies. In a time of limited resources, sensible distribution of tasks among these myriad agencies along with exchanges of services and interagency coordination can avoid needless duplication, save money, and provide better services. A good example is in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where the traditional school health program was replaced by community health clinics established in each school building, run by the city health department, utilizing nurse practitioners as the primary initial provider of services.

This concept of mutual aid makes every kind of sense economically and politically -- yet our current IRE study of school district response to declining resources will conclude that few districts in fact engage in significant mutual aid with other agencies and that times of retrenchment seem to produce "hunkering-down" and inward turning responses by school officials rather than reaching out and innovation.

What this means is that citizen activists and activist educators must join forces to press for installing ways to realize the MUTUAL AID theme in practice -- to overcome the built-in organizational resistance to changes of this kind.

Mutual aid can be recognized as an operative principle in the SOCIAL CONTRACT and can contribute importantly to the development of the sense of public good.

I come now to the fourth and final KEYNOTE -- SHARING THE POWER --

which should be thought of being legitimated by the SOCIAL CONTRACT and being carried on in the spirit of establishing a sense of the PUBLIC GOOD and MUTUAL AID.

For ten years, IRE and the National Committee for Citizens in Education and scores of local and state organizations and a wide variety of researchers and commentators have been advocating a strongly increased role for parents and other citizens in policy development and decisionmaking. The case for such participation is usually made on the grounds of either democratic theory or educational politics -- either that in a democratic society those affected by agency or institutional decisions have an inalienable right to influence those decisions or that schools need to be improved and need more community support, hence giving parents and citizens a role in decisionmaking will increase their sense of ownership in the schools and hence their support for them. Both of these are good and valid reasons for participation. I don't need to belabor them here. Nor do I need to belabor the point that despite ten years of talk and advocacy there is still very little sharing of power with parents and citizens in our public schools (with some notable, interesting and promising exceptions). I'd like briefly to look at the sharing the power theme from the perspective of our current research on how school districts are responding to declining resources. We have learned that:

- The management and politics of schools in a time of decline is dramatically different from what it is in a time of growth. In a period of growth, constituency pressure can be relieved by adding programs and services. These programs create their own constituencies. In decline, the additive response is seldom a real option, and cutback decisions have an immediate negative and highly visible impact on some constituencies.

- Most school administrators recognize that community participation in retrenchment decisionmaking is not just a good idea but a necessity.
- Most of the administrator response to this recognition is to follow the advice in the professional literature about such involvement. The result is usually community involvement without power, which is usually manipulative. As one of our respondents put it...

> "The fundamental flaw in the conventional ways of involving the community is that people are asked to participate at their own burial. They are not allowed to have a say whether they are to be buried. Only how and when."

More findings:

- There is good evidence that such manipulative involvement (without real power sharing) leads to more, not less, community conflict, to an explosion of alienation, and more opposition.
- Too many administrators seek to share blame and responsibility, and use citizen task forces and advisory committees as messengers of the bad news, "The Task Force Recommends That A School Should Be Closed."

Now, <u>WHAT SHOULD AND SHOULDN'T IT MEAN TO SHARE POWER?</u>

- It does not mean that superintendents and Boards of Education abdicate responsibility.
- It does not mean that citizens or any particular citizens group must always have their way or have a veto power over a cutback decision.

- It does mean integrating citizens into the formal due process procedures of school district governance. More specifically, within the perspective of this new study, sharing power requires a form of citizen participation that meets the following four criteria:

  CRITERION ONE. THE STRUCTURES FOR PARTICIPATION MUST BE FORMAL AND REPRESENTATIVE (not wide-open and ad hoc). The approach should be neither so tight as to be subject to control by school officials nor so loose as to be subject to capture by the loudest or strongest special interests.

  CRITERION TWO. THE PROCESS PROVIDES SOME KIND OF DIRECT OR FORMAL LINK TO THE SCHOOL BOARD (not just to the superintendent or central office staff). This ensures that citizens' views will at least get a public hearing even if they don't always prevail.

  CRITERION THREE. THE PROCESS IS BROAD-BASED. There are built in lines of communication between the participants on a council or task force and their communities. More citizens must be involved than just the 5 or 6 or 10 elected to a board or committee.

  CRITERION FOUR. THE AGENDA MUST BE OPEN. This means the citizen participants must have a hand in defining the problem as well as discussing the alternative solutions. (This is, of course, a basic principle of good planning and problem solving as well as of participation.)

We have discovered a few examples that meet these criteria, and hence seem

to offer hope of reducing conflict rather than increasing it, and of being politically productive for both the citizens and educators. One instance is right here in Salt Lake City, where there is a six-step process for implementing difficult cutbacks. Step one consists of establishing a comprehensive citizens committee. That committee reports to the board and makes its report public at the same time as it is given to the board. The procedure provides for systematic public meetings at which others can have input into the citizens' committee's deliberations and decisions. The citizens' committee is required to develop alternative or modified proposals based on the results of public hearings before it presents its recommendations to the board at a public meeting. Newsletters and special mailings are used to keep the community informed, provide notice of public hearings and summaries of tentative solutions and alternatives. As an aside, let me point out that scrupulous attention to the finer points of due process can make community participation an exercise in collaboration rather than one of frustration and alienation.

It is time to close. I hope I have said enough -- but not too much -- about the four themes that I propose as the keynotes for this conference.

The SOCIAL CONTRACT...

parents, citizens and educators debating and agreeing on the purposes of education and the processes for decisionmaking.

The PUBLIC GOOD...

recreating a sense of the public good to transcend the immobilization caused by selfishness and warring special interests.

MUTUAL AID...

exchanging services and resources.

And

SHARING POWER...

authentic mechanism for participation.

These four keynotes can provide some sense of direction for citizen activists and activist educators who seek to form new partnerships between communities and their school and who seek both equity and quality in education.